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Amy L. Blair. *Reading Up: Middle-Class Readers and the Culture of Success in the Early Twentieth-Century United States.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012. ix + 250 pp. $28.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4399-0668-2.

Reviewed by Edward S. Slavishak (Susquehanna University)

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You're Doing It Wrong

To "read up" in the early twentieth century, Amy L. Blair explains, was to read a book for the boost that it promised to provide when one divulged the fact that one had read it. As a way to select and consume literature–to build "personal libraries"–reading up functioned as a self-promotional strategy for those for whom the credentials of education or pedigree were unavailable. *Reading Up* is certainly about books, but it is also about a way of using books that reveals the do-it-yourself nature of popular literary advice.

For historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era, *Reading Up* offers a detailed examination of the strategies that mass magazines offered readers as they plotted their upward mobility. The central figure is Hamilton Wright Mabie, the book columnist for the *Ladies' Home Journal* from 1902 to 1912. Mabie recommended books that would "interest, educate, and refresh" his varied readership. He catered to their presumed tastes and, crucially, hoped to entice them into texts that they might never choose on their own. Mabie's balancing act was to champion the elite book for a crowd that was "both attracted to this book's cultural capital and daunted by its perceived difficulty" (p. 40). He floated hazy buzzwords like "sentimental" and "picturesque" to allow readers to describe their experiences.

The procedure that Mabie encouraged was a conscious misreading. Instead of ferreting out and then accepting authors' intentions, readers should identify with those characters and enjoy those settings that tickled their fancy. Mabie's advice was essentially to read by any means necessary; whatever interpretive devices allowed readers to finish their book and move on to the next were fair game. If his audience approached books recreationally, then they should do so with the "best" books. If it made a book palatable to cheer on a character that the author meant to be contemptible, then so be it. If more people enjoyed a book when they reimagined its muted tragedy as an optimistic tale, then the more the merrier.

Blair provides wonderful accounts of the authors William Dean Howells, Henry James, and Edith Wharton as they barely came to terms with these interpretive acrobatics. Howells took impressive payments from the *Journal* in exchange for over two years' worth of serialized writing, while remaining largely tone-deaf to the interests of the magazine's audience (as editor Edward Bok saw them). James was "well known for being well known" and producing difficult books, yet Mabie sandwiched him between popular romances and James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826) when listing the best American novels (p. 100). Blair reads James's revised *New York Editions* (1907-1909) as a move against readers who sympathetically surrendered to any sentimental element that they could detect. Meanwhile, Wharton railed in print against people who methodically scheduled their reading, decoded books as they pleased, and had the nerve to tweak her plots.

The hitch was that these authors operated in a marketplace, and Blair is careful to show how the profits of romanticism and the erudition of realism mixed uneasily for the literati. Each of the writers awkwardly reconciled these impulses while simultaneously patrolling the borders between high and low. Mabie, in contrast, would have none of it. A popular audience could engage with "difficult" literature by make-believing that it contained

heroes and spectacles. All of those involved worked in an industry that rested on the pillars of popular sales and critical reputation. Successful marketing required authors to convey an aura of accessibility, but reputation demanded that writers never seem as if they bowed to popular whims. Mabie's tenure at the *Journal* depended on this tension.

Blair conjures a series of evocative, hypothetical images, namely, young men and women absorbed by Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) or James's *A Portrait of a Lady* (1881) as they jostled along on streetcars and sat on the decks of commuter ferries. Mabie explicitly encouraged people to read in such situations, instead of merely going along for the ride. Occasionally, the readership shimmers into view as people who wanted to be taken seriously by their peers. They sought practical advice about how they could make more of themselves, or their children, by putting in time. Reading books did not matter as much as having read them. Streetcars and ferries were handy sites to throw oneself briefly into literature, and they allowed for the type of advertising that seems central to the "up" part of reading up.

Despite the book's subtitle, it is not truly focused on readers. Blair's use of equivocal phrases (as in "the marketing department must have at least discerned these reactions as distinct possibilities," [p. 78]) is reasonable in a study that does not have easy access to audience reactions. *Reading Up* relies on the skill of Bok and Mabie in knowing their audience and giving them what they wanted (and what they did not yet know they wanted). The approach requires faith in the hidden persistence of the "observant, and long-term, *Journal* reader," one who presumably took instructions to heart after accepting expert calculations of intellectual capital (p. 93). But this reading milieu was full of strategic samplings and stubborn misunderstandings. To train inventive mavericks was surely to risk losing them, as they grew agile enough to read beyond instruction. Thus, the people that Blair imagines as reading themselves up the ladder are sometimes willed into existence. Toward the end of the book, she refers to the "reader who reads up," as if that was a figure of whom we have independent knowledge (p. 166).

More important than measuring the size of the reading up phenomenon is recognizing that Blair has tapped into a fascinating turn-of-the-century relationship (even if one-sided). Bok's business plan lent itself to a books column that offered readers their own type of personal prospectus. Without ever explaining how elite books made successful people, Mabie secured his position as a taste maker for a magazine with an extraordinary readership. Scholars interested in the business of literature, the hierarchies of culture, and the construction of the striver as a social type will find *Reading Up* to be a good investment.

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